

**Statement of
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.**

before the

Subcommittee on Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives

April 24, 2007

Presented by

Ms. Kimberly Dawn Hazelgrove
Widow of CW2 Brian D Hazelgrove
Member of Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan.”

...President Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

Not for publication
Until Released
By the Committee

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Chairman Hall, Representative Lamborn, and Members of the House Veterans' Affairs Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of all Gold Star Wives regarding the importance of addressing critical services for America's military widows and widowers and their children.

My name is Kimberly Hazelgrove. I am the widow of CW2 Brian D Hazelgrove, a native of Edinburgh, Indiana. My husband entered the US Army shortly after graduating high school and served over ten years. Brian was an energetic and charismatic leader. His soldiers and superiors always had the utmost respect and admiration for his ethics, compassion and abilities. He was a career soldier full of goals, ambition, dedication and potential.

Brian was also a husband and father to Taylor, Zachary, Brandon and Katelyn. He was a gentle and loving father who never failed to prove he adored his children. At times we both had to endure single parenthood while the other was deployed and understood the important balance of family and mission. And Brian was dedicated to both. He faithfully deployed to Iraq in support of America's mission in November 2003. On January 23, 2004, Brian was flying a mission in support of ground troops in Iraq with pilot CW2 Micheal Blaise when their helicopter crashed. Both Brian and Michael were killed. Brian was 29. Our youngest child was just 7 months old.

I am here before you as a representative of America's military widows and widowers and as a member of Gold Star Wives. My hope is that by the end of my testimony; you will see the need to act immediately to rectify the unfair and inadequate resources that Gold Star Families endure after notification of death of their service member.

I was a Sergeant First Class in the US Army stationed at Fort Drum, the mother of our infant and toddler, step-mother to two children and the wife of a deployed soldier. Life was difficult, but with the support of our units and families, I was independently managing the household and raising our family, always with the hope that Brian was safe and anticipating his return. Our lives were changed forever when Brian was killed.

A year passed before I was able to present the Department of the Army's Casualty Assistance Office feedback on the various aspects of my case. They responded with appropriate measures to correct discrepancies and implemented procedures to ensure further training of personnel and strict adherence of policy within their area of responsibility. However, much still needs to be done to secure quality of life for all survivors.

PERSONNEL TRAINING

I feel that adequate training and resources are still lacking for all personnel who function in the various roles while supporting a Casualty's family. Across the spectrum of DoD and VA, there is not one single dedicated office for the Military Survivor. It is left to the various representatives of these organizations to do their best to inform, assist and

support the family member in their time of need. And they can only do so much within their subject area of expertise. After the initial response of support has ended, family members struggle to research, understand and stay informed of changes to benefit entitlements and legislative actions.

Notification Officers face the most daunting task of all; informing the family of their loss. These brave men and women face a number of scenarios of reactions, ranging from avoidance to violence, and will likely come face to face with multiple reactions during their time with the family. Unfortunately for these personnel, notification procedures across the military are still inconsistent. Unsuspecting Notification Officers (Primarily a Chaplain and an Assistant) are sent to the wrong address. In my case, the Notification Officers received the wrong address from Fort Drum's Casualty Assistance Office and actually had to call me in the middle of the night before arriving at my house. By the time they arrived, I knew why they were coming. I was a soldier and had received training on this scenario. Now, I was the recipient. I know my husband filled out all of the appropriate paperwork that was required before his deployment because I was present at the time. In addition, copies of this paperwork was kept at the unit, sent home with him and also put into his personnel file. Where was the breakdown in communication and procedures that provided these soldiers the wrong address?

Casualty Assistance Officers (CAO) provide initial and essential support to meet any need within their power of the grieving family members. My Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO) was an extraordinary person and I owe most of my recovery from this tragedy to

him. I met CPT Brian Batchelder early the next morning at my home. With very little training, inadequate resources and at times minimal support from outside personnel, he loyally devoted himself to meet our needs. He escorted me throughout the application process to initiate my benefit entitlements, tracked my sister's safe and prompt arrival back into the country from her own deployment, helped facilitate funeral arrangements, assisted in the relocation of my family and provided unlimited emotional support. Although extremely helpful and intuitive, CPT Batchelder was not an expert on benefit entitlements or transition procedures.

As a Casualty Assistance Officer, CPT Batchelder was not provided the basic resources to perform the essential duties of the task he had. Adequate workspace with communication equipment was not provided. Many times he was forced to return to his office within his unit to work on my case. While there, he was tagged with responsibilities outside of his Casualty Assistant duties. Left with no options, he worked out of his home or car to minimize the impact on my family.

CPT Batchelder was assigned to my case for a period of about six months and then reassigned for a deployment tasking. A new CAO was assigned to my case to complete outstanding issues, including the formal results briefing on my husbands death and lingering benefit entitlements that had been interrupted. This new CAO, a very young lieutenant inexperienced with the various military programs and services, demonstrated a lack of motivation or initiative and lacked the exposure to the events that had transpired

over the previous months. After a couple meetings with this person and lack of assistance, I did not pursue further communication.

Like many widows or widowers, I moved away from where I was stationed with my husband to start a new life. I gave up my Army career and moved to Lorton, VA in January 2005. At this time, I had not received Survivors Benefit Plan payments from the Defense Finance and Accounting System for which I was entitled since May 2004. The payments had stopped just three months after he was killed because of a clerical issue with my original documentation. Repeated attempts to correct my Survivors Benefit Plan entitlement through two local Retirement Services Officers (RSO) also failed. The Retirement Services Officers that I contacted were unfamiliar with the procedures or policies affecting these types of benefits and I found myself educating them on what needed to be done.

I eventually contacted the Department of the Army's Casualty Assistance Center. I recruited the help of Dan Ruiz and LTC Logan. With their help, I made contact with the correct office and person within the Defense Finance and Accounting Office and was able to reactivate my Survivors Benefit Plan in September 2005, 18 months after I was entitled to the benefit.

BENEFIT ENTITLEMENTS

Six months is a very short time to require a family that has experienced a traumatic life altering event, even under the best circumstances, to be able to navigate the current

complexities of the military survivor system. For the widow or widower of an active duty service member, like myself, the military expects a transition of responsibility from the active military component to Veteran's Affairs. A family previously established in family housing and accustomed to living on the military base has increased financial burdens to absorb and a new identity to grasp. The response to family members is critical within the first year after the loss of their loved one. However, it is imperative that there be continuity of service and support to the families of our service members after the initial response has faded away.

As a widow, I receive monetary supplements because of my husband's death while serving his country. I applaud your success in increasing the initial death payments and SGLI payments to families of the deceased service member. I would like your support in fulfilling the commitment to fully sustain the benefits of our widows and widowers and those of our children for the future.

The SBP payment that I worked so hard to receive for almost two years brings a total of \$99 a month into my household income. My full entitlement a month as a surviving spouse is \$1166. The dollar for dollar offset generated by the income I receive from the VA's Dependency Indemnity Compensation reduces my entitlement by over \$1000 a month. Because of my husband's rank and years of service when he died, I actually receive a little left over money, where most spouses receive no money at all. This offset does not benefit any military survivor and especially victimizes those families whose deceased service members were junior enlisted and or with less years of service. Most of

these families are young families like mine. My \$99 a month from my Survivors Benefit supplements increased child care, healthcare and household expenses that I incur as a single working mother and sole provider for my children. I would like this panel to realize the entire scope of inequity of this offset. Disabled military retirees, federal retired annuitants and their survivors receive their full benefit without offset of VA benefits. I ask you here today, how is the military survivor any different?

I have reached the three year milestone of widowhood and my dental and healthcare coverage under TRICARE PRIME have ceased. I am currently researching my options through my local TRICARE Representative. There are increased costs associated with continued coverage that did not exist while I was covered under the Active Duty Tricare Prime program.

CONCLUSION

I ask the panel to understand that many widows and widowers are not able to make the monetary sacrifice that I have made here today in order to testify. Fortunately, I am able to be here before you with the blessing of my company to enlighten you of the burden that my family has had to endure over the past three years and the continued inequity of entitlements directly related to inconsistent years of service commitments. I ask you to remember the young widows and widowers at home caring for their young children who can not be here before you. I ask you to remember the widows and widowers in other states who can not afford be here before you. Your decisions make a difference in their lives.

As my children grow older and our lives change, so do our benefits. I continually need to seek out subject matter experts within the benefits arena on my own. Healthcare, Education, Social Security, Survivors Benefit annuity and Dependents Indemnity Compensation all have different requirements. Legislative actions on benefits continue to influence entitlements. Tracking these changes is time consuming and tedious task as the information and experts are currently compartmentalized and geographically dispersed. I work a full time job and raise two small children. This has not left me with much time to track down the exact person who is going to help me get a specific benefit.

Gold Star Wives of America has been a source of support and information beyond anything I have received thus far. The ladies volunteer their time and efforts into educating me on the process that forever lies ahead of me as a widow. I firmly stand behind and support the Gold Star Wives request that Regional Survivors Offices should be established to meet the needs of military survivors during and after the Casualty Assistance Officer has finished his duties. This office would provide oversight to the policy issues of survivors, provide transitional assistance, legislative feedback and act as the main coordinator between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. This is a key component to ensuring the commitment to your service members that their families will be taken care of.

As a service member entering military service, no where are you told that your family will have to fight to receive adequate benefits upon which they are entitled in the event of

your death. Families plan for financial stability in the event of tragedy based on our promise that they will be taken care of. And yet I testify before you here today as an example that this has not happened to the full extent. I implore our leadership to immediately cease the DIC offset to SBP for all widows and widowers.

I thank this Subcommittee for using this hearing as one more avenue of awareness and education and for giving me an opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences as a Gold Star Wife. I will be happy to work further with the Subcommittee on any initiatives. Thank you for your time and consideration.

BIOGRAPHY--MS. KIMBERLY D HAZELGROVE

Kimberly Hazelgrove was born in Cleveland, Ohio and is the widow of Chief Warrant Officer Brian D Hazelgrove, U.S. Army, who served in Iraq. He died on active duty overseas in 2004. Kimberly has two children and two step-children. In 1994, Kimberly entered the US Army as an Intelligence Analyst. She served nine years of duty with tours to Korea and to Cuba in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, attaining the rank of Sergeant First Class. Unable to fulfill the requirements of active duty after Brian's death, she left the service to pursue a career in the Intelligence field. Kimberly is a dedicated mother to her children and advocate of widows or widowers and veteran's issues. She became a member of Gold Star Wives in January 2005 and has been active since. Kimberly is currently parliamentarian for Potomac Chapter and is in training to become more active on legislative work. All her Gold Star Wives work is voluntary. Her

mission is to provide support to new young widows or widowers and educate policy makers.

Kimberly is currently employed by Lockheed Martin Mission Services on the Intelligence Analysis Training Team.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Neither Ms. Hazelgrove nor the Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. have received any Federal grant or contract, relevant to the subject matter of this testimony, during the current or previous two fiscal years.

Signature, Ms. Kimberly D Hazelgrove

Date